



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

December 11, 2003

Lieutenant Arturo Valdez
Central Records Division
McAllen Police Department
P.O. Box 220
McAllen, Texas 78502-0220

OR2003-8898

Dear Lt. Valdez:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 195392.

The McAllen Police Department (the "department") received a request for case number 03-045590. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

We must first address the department's obligations under section 552.301 of the Government Code. Subsections 552.301(a) and (b) provide:

(a) A governmental body that receives a written request for information that it wishes to withhold from public disclosure and that it considers to be within one of the [act's] exceptions . . . must ask for a decision from the attorney general about whether the information is within that exception if there has not been a previous determination about whether the information falls within one of the exceptions.

(b) The governmental body must ask for the attorney general's decision and state the exceptions that apply within a reasonable time but not later than the 10th business day after the date of receiving the written request.

The department received the request for information on October 31, 2003. You requested a decision from this office on November 19, 2003, twelve business days after the request had been made. Consequently, you failed to request a decision within the ten business day period mandated by section 552.301(a) of the Government Code.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the requested information is public and must be released, unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information from disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ) (governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). Generally, a governmental body may demonstrate a compelling reason to withhold information by a showing that the information is made confidential by another source of law or affects third party interests. *See* Open Records Decision No. 630 (1994).

Section 552.108 provides a discretionary exception to disclosure that protects a governmental body's interests. As such, it may be waived by the governmental body. *See* Open Records Decision No. 177 (1977) (governmental body may waive statutory predecessor to section 552.108); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally). While section 552.108 can provide a compelling reason to withhold information sufficient to overcome the presumption of openness under section 552.302 in certain circumstances, you have not demonstrated a compelling reason to withhold the submitted information pursuant to section 552.108 in this instance. *See* Open Records Decision No. 586 at 3 (1991) (need of a governmental body, other than governmental body that has failed to timely seek an open records decision, may, in appropriate circumstances, be a compelling reason to withhold information pursuant to statutory predecessor to section 552.108). We determine that the department has waived its claims under section 552.108 of the Government Code.

However, section 552.130 provides a compelling reason to overcome the presumption of openness under section 552.302 of the Government Code as regards certain information contained in the responsive documentation.¹ Therefore, we will address the applicability of this exception to the requested information.

Section 552.130 excepts from required public disclosure information that relates to a motor vehicle operator's or driver's license or permit issued by an agency of this state or a motor vehicle title or registration issued by an agency of this state. *See* Gov't Code § 552.130.

¹ The Office of the Attorney General will raise a mandatory exception like section 552.101 on behalf of a governmental body, but ordinarily will not raise other exceptions. Open Records Decision Nos. 481 (1987), 480 (1987), 470 (1987).

Therefore, the department must withhold all Texas driver's license numbers, license plate numbers, and vehicle identification numbers that appear on the requested information. Accordingly, we have marked the information that must be withheld under section 552.130. The department must release the remaining information.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

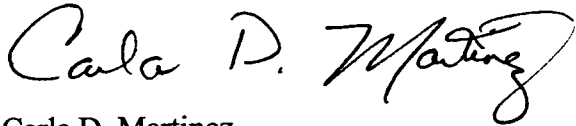
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at (512) 475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carla D. Martinez". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Carla D. Martinez
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CDM/sdk

Ref: ID# 195392

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Elsa Gallegos
1906 Adrian
Harlingen, Texas 78550
(w/o enclosures)